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Our Little Secrets

Torture: As American as Apple Pie

By Alexander Cockburn and Jeffrey St. Clair

Reality finally caught up with the Empire's pr machine, and sprinted right past it. The weapons of mass destruction turned out to be digital cameras. Remember Napoleon's dictum about the weight of material and moral factors in war? Materially the torture techniques okayed by Bush and Rumsfeld and carried out, *con amore*, by Graner, Lynndie England and the others, have finished off America's mission to Baghdad. Of course, officially sanctioned US torture's nothing new. In fact it's American as apple pie. But like another instrument of US policy, assassination, it has always led a spectral life in the press, crammed into the closet, swaddled in protective layers of "allegations of...", "never proven charges" and kindred verbiage.

One of the darkest threads in postwar US imperial history has been the CIA's involvement with torture, as instructor, practitioner or contractor. Since its inception the CIA has taken a keen interest in torture, avidly studying Nazi techniques and protecting their exponents such as Klaus Barbie. The CIA's official line is that torture is wrong and is ineffective, a line echoed by Seymour Hersh in his otherwise splendid reporting. It is indeed wrong. On countless occasions it has been appallingly effective.

Remember Dan Mitrione, kidnapped and killed by Uruguay's Tupamaros and portrayed by Yves Montand in Costa-Gavras's film State of Siege? In the late 1960s Mitrione

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Iraq Diary

Ebb-Tide of the Occupation

By Patrick Cockburn

American civil and military leaders in Iraq live in a strange fantasy world. It is on display every day in a cavernous hall in the old Islamic Conference Centre in Baghdad, which can be entered only by passing through four US military checkpoints. Here the Coalition spokesmen hold daily press conferences. The civil side is represented by Dan Senor of the Coalition Provisional Authority, a bony-faced man in a dark suit, recently imported from the White House press office. He makes little secret of the fact that his job is to present a picture of Iraq that will get President Bush re-elected. He jogs around the heavily protected US enclave, known as the Green Zone, wearing a T-shirt with 'Bush and Cheney in 2004' written on it. When guerrillas had taken control of most of the roads out of Baghdad Senor was still referring to them as a small gang of al-Qaida terrorists and die-hard supporters of Saddam Hussein, desperately seeking to prevent the birth of a new Iraq.

Much zanier is Brigadier General Mark Kimmitt, who specialises in steely-eyed determination. He likes to illustrate his answers with homilies drawn from the home life of the Kimmitt family. One day an Iraqi journalist complained that US helicopters were scaring children in Baghdad by roaring low and fast over the rooftops. Kimmitt replied that he had spent most of his adult life 'either on or near military posts, married to a woman who teaches in the schools' and that on these bases 'you often hear the sound of tanks firing. You often hear the sound of artillery rounds going off.' Yet despite the constant thundering of the guns, the general continued proudly, Mrs Kimmitt had been able to keep her pupils calm by 'letting them understand that those booms and those bangs that they were hearing were simply the sounds of freedom'.

Kimmitt urged the journalist to go home and explain to his family that it was only thanks to the thundering guns, these sounds of freedom, that the children could 'enjoy a free life'. In fact, US helicopters have been flying so fast and so low over the last six months to make it more difficult for guerrillas to shoot them down. Several had been hit, mostly around Falluja, by shoulder-fired heat-seeking ground-to-air missiles.

Few Iraqis share the Kimmitt family's benign view of US air power. A day after listening to the general I visited Musak, a Christian accountant. Normally he works in the Dohra electric power station. He was at home because the giant turbines have been closed down and the German engineers from Siemens who were supposed to install new turbines had fled Baghdad for fear of being kidnapped. The walls of al-Iskan, the lower-middle-class district where Musak lives, are covered in slogans supporting the resistance. Musak explained: 'A few weeks ago a man, nobody knows who, shot at a helicopter with his Kalashnikov. The helicopter fired two rockets in return. They hit the tent where a family was holding a wake for a dead relative, killing two people and wounding 15.' After this, support for the insurgents increased in al-Iskan.

That the US military had based their entire strategy on a belief in their own propaganda only became clear last month, as local uprisings swept across Iraq. US commanders had convinced themselves that all

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worked for the US Office of Public Safety, part of the Agency for International Development. In Brazil, so A.J. Langguth (a former New York Times bureau chief in Saigon) related in his book Hidden Terrors, Mitrione was among the US advisers teaching Brazilian police how much electric shock to apply to prisoners without killing them. In Uruguay, according to the former chief of police intelligence, Mitrione helped "professionalize" torture as a routine measure and advised on psychological techniques such as playing tapes of women and children screaming that the prisoner's family was being tortured.

In the months after the 9/11/01 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, "truth drugs" were hailed by some columnists such as Newsweek's Jonathan Alter for use in the war against Al Qaeda. This was an enthusiasm shared by the US Navy after the war against Hitler, when its intelligence officers got on the trail of Dr. Kurt Plotner's research into "truth serums" at Dachau. Plotner gave Jewish and Russian prisoners high doses of mescaline and then observed their behavior, in which they expressed hatred for their guards and made confessional statements about their own psychological makeup.

As part of its larger MK-ULTRA project the CIA gave money to Dr. Ewen Cameron, at McGill University. Cameron was a pioneer in sensory-deprivation techniques. Cameron once locked up a woman in a small white box for thirty-five days, deprived of light, smell and sound. The CIA doctors were amazed at this, knowing that their own experiments with a sensory-deprivation tank in 1955 had induced severe psychological reactions in less than forty hours.

Start torturing, and it's easy to get carried away. Torture destroys the tortured and corrupts the society that sanctions it. Just like the FBI after 9/11/01 the CIA in 1968 got frustrated by its inability to break suspected leaders of Vietnam's National Liberation Front by its usual methods of interrogation and torture. So the Agency began more advanced experiments, in one of which it anesthetized three prisoners, opened their skulls and planted electrodes in their brains. They were revived, put in a room and given knives. The CIA psychologists then activated the electrodes, hoping the prisoners would attack one another. They didn't. The electrodes were removed, the prisoners shot and their bodies burned. You can read about it in our book *Whiteout.*

In recent years the United States has been charged by the UN and also by human rights organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International with tolerating torture in US prisons, by methods ranging from solitary, twenty-three-hour-a-day confinement in concrete boxes for years on end, to activating 50,000-volt shocks through a mandatory belt worn by prisoners. Torture is far from unknown in the interrogation rooms of U.S. law enforcement, with Abner Louima, sodomized by a cop using a stick, a notorious recent example.

The most infamous disclosure of consistent torture by a police department in recent years concerned cops in Chicago in the mid-70s through early 80s who used electroshock, oxygen deprivation, hanging on hooks, the bastinado and beatings of the testicles. The torturers were white and their victims black or brown.

A prisoner in California's Pelican Bay State Prison was thrown into boiling water. Others get 50,000-volt shocks from stun guns. Many states have so-called "secure housing units" where prisoners are kept in solitary those concrete boxes for years on end, many of them going mad in the process. Amnesty International has denounced U.S. police forces for "a pattern of unchecked excessive force amounting to torture."

In 2000 the UN delivered a severe public rebuke to the United States for its record on preventing torture and degrading punishment. A 10-strong panel of experts highlighted what it said were Washington's breaches of the agreement ratified by the United States in 1994. The UN Committee Against Torture, which monitors international compliance with the UN Convention Against Torture, has called for the abolition of electric-shock stun belts (1000 in use in the U.S.) and restraint chairs on prisoners, as well as an end to holding children in adult jails. It also said female detainees are "very often held in humiliating and degrading circumstances" and expressed concern over alleged cases of sexual assault by police and prison officers. The panel criticized the excessively harsh regime in maximum security prisons, the use of chain gangs in which prisoners perform manual labor while shackled together, and the number of cases of police brutality against racial minorities.

So far as rape is concerned, because of the rape factories more conventionally known as the U.S. prison system, there are estimates that twice as many men as women are raped in the U.S. each year. A Human Rights Watch report in April of 2001 cited a December 2000 Prison Journal study based on a survey of inmates in seven men's prison facilities in four states. The results showed that 21 percent of the inmates had experienced at least one episode of pressured or forced sexual contact since being incarcerated, and at least 7 percent had been raped in their facilities. A 1996 study of the Nebraska prison system produced similar findings, with 22 percent of male inmates reporting that they had been pressured or forced to have sexual contact against their will while incarcerated. Of these, more than 50 percent had submitted to forced anal sex at least once. Extrapolating these findings to the national level gives a total of at least 140,000 inmates who have been raped. CP

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Editors
Alexander Cockburn
Jeffrey St. Clair

Business
Becky Grant

Design
Deborah Thomas

Counselor
Ben Sonnenberg

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(**Iraq** *continued from page 1)*

the pinprick guerrilla attacks came from Former Regime Loyalists and mysterious Foreign Fighters. They spoke glowingly of the progress made by the new US-trained Iraqi police, army and paramilitary units. These loyal forces, ultimately to number 200,000, were intended gradually to replace American troops.

The speed with which US plans for Iraq fell apart is astonishing, but the reason is plain: the US military and Paul Bremer, the US viceroy in Iraq, provoked simultaneous confrontations with Iraq's two main communities, the Shia and Sunni, who together make up 80 per cent of the population.

At the end of March, Bremer decided to squeeze Muktada al-Sadr, a radical Shia cleric, by closing his small-circulation newspaper, Al Hawza, and arresting his chief lieutenant in Najaf. Most Shia thought Sadr a violent maverick: Bremer made him a martyr. Although they didn't like Sadr, Shias decided they disliked the Americans more. Religion and nationalism came together. A poster shows Sadr and two of his relatives, both revered because they were murdered by Saddam, with the Iraqi flag in the background. You can see it on walls all over Baghdad and southern Iraq. Bremer's plan to marginalise Sadr blew up in his face, and the black-clad gunmen of Sadr's Army of the Mehdi seized large parts of southern Iraq, including Najaf and Kut.

A few days later the US army provoked another crisis, this time with the Sunni community. In revenge for the killing and dismemberment of four US security men in Falluja on 31 March, three battalions of marines surrounded the city and started to bombard it. To Iraqis this looked like collective punishment. Within a few days the marines had managed to turn the Fallujans, previously regarded by most other Iraqis as dangerous hillbillies, into symbols of a reborn Iraqi nationalism. Far from confining the insurrection to Falluja, the siege of the city encouraged further uprisings in the Sunni towns along the Euphrates.

As US control over large parts of Iraq began to slip, officials responded by refusing to believe what was happening. Only occasionally were there visible signs of panic. The CPA website is normally full of upbeat information about reconstruction projects. It also has news about security, the chief preoccupation of the foreign businessmen who make up most of its readership. As the crisis grew worse the CPA decided that the information was too alarming to report. A message on its website simply read: 'For security reasons there are no security reports.'

On the ground American soldiers were being killed because their commanders couldn't believe that the rebellion was spreading. The army was still sending convoys of petrol tankers down the highway from Baghdad to Falluja after guerrillas had taken control of it. I didn't realise the insurgents had reached the western outskirts of Baghdad, and five days into the rebellion, as I tried to get into or at least close to Falluja, I was caught in an ambush at Abu Ghraib. It is a town of scattered houses, abandoned factories and date palms which offers plenty of cover for guerrillas. We knew that the war had moved closer to Baghdad when we saw four tanks, their barrels pointed towards us, closing the road that runs behind Baghdad airport. Everywhere in Abu Ghraib there were freshly painted anti-American slogans on the walls. One read: 'We shall knock on the gates of heaven with the skulls of Americans.' On another wall somebody had written: 'Sunni Shia = Jihad against Occupation.'

In the distance we could see three columns of oily black smoke rising into the sky; local people told us an American convoy had been attacked a few hours earlier. We decided to follow an aid convoy bound for Falluja; young men were waving Iraqi flags from the backs of the trucks. The main road was closed, so we drove down narrow tracks through shabby brown villages where people clapped as we passed. Aiding Falluja was obviously popular. I recognised an abandoned milk factory beside the road. I had been here before: the US had hit the factory with Tomahawk missiles during the 1991 Gulf War, claiming it was producing biological weapons. None was ever found.

Just as we reached the highway another convoy of petrol tankers accompanied by US soldiers on Humvees drove past. It was immediately attacked. When we heard the bark of machineguns and the whoosh of rocket-propelled grenades overhead, we drove off the road onto a piece of wasteland and lay on the ground with our faces pressed into the sand. Other drivers took cover near us. Bassil al-Kaissi, our driver, shouted at them: 'Take off your keffiyehs or the Americans will think you are mujahedin and kill you.'

There was a pause in the firing and we got back into the car and drove off down a narrow road away from the fighting. We moved slowly: I had told the driver not to raise dust and attract attention. We had reached a small bridge over a canal when several mujahedin ran towards us carrying a heavy machinegun on a tripod and rocket-propelled grenade launchers. They had stopped on the bridge and were listening to the shooting, which had started up again, seeming not to know where the fighting was. One of them shouted: 'What is happening?' Bassil, not wanting to arouse their suspicion by driving away too quickly, stopped the car. 'We were trying to bring help to Falluja,' he told them, 'but those pigs opened fire on us.'

The convoy we had seen attacked was, I think, the fourth to be ambushed on this stretch of road over a period of 24 hours. Several US soldiers had been killed in the earlier fighting and others captured by guerrillas. For two or three days US generals, still believing they were facing a finite number of FRLs and FFs, would not accept that spontaneous uprisings were taking place in the towns all the way to the Syrian border. Casualties surged above the number killed and wounded in the war to overthrow Saddam Hussein. A dozen US marines died in a savage little battle in Ramadi, just upriver from Falluja, and another five at al-Qaim, a few miles from the Syrian border.

There was other grim news for the US commanders. One battalion of the new Iraqi army refused to go to Falluja: the soldiers said they were not prepared to fight fellow Iraqis. A battalion of the Iraqi Civil Defence Corps, a force made up of 40,000 militiamen from the anti-Saddam opposition parties which now form the Iraqi Governing Council, fought hard at first. The parties claimed that this was evidence that only their men had the political commitment to form the core of the new Iraqi security force. But after 11 days in the front line this battalion also mutinied, with only the Kurds prepared to go on fighting.

The mutinies and desertions shouldn't have come as a great shock. Iraqi police have always told me their job is to catch criminals not guerrillas. The US-trained soldiers were paid only $60 a month, half the money made by garbage collectors in Baghdad. Early on in the crisis I met five pilgrims walking to Kerbala. They were dressed in black and were carrying a green banner with a religious slogan. They expressed routine anti-American sentiments: the surprise came when they told me they were all soldiers in the Iraqi Civil Defence Corps.

Why has US rule in Iraq been so dysfunctional? Why did the US marines have

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Portland's Killer Cops

The War at Home, Oregon Sector

By Kristian Williams

The place: Portland, Oregon; the date, March 28, 2004: a white cop killed an unarmed black man at a traffic stop. In the time since the incident, details have trickled through the news in a steady, depressing drizzle. The victim's name, and the officer's. The victim's criminal record, previous complaints against the cop. Eyewitness accounts. A coroner's report. But the accumulation of detail doesn't always add clarity. Witnesses disagree, stories differ. It is not clear now, and may never be made clear, whether officer Jason Sery pulled James Jahar Perez over, or whether he just followed him into the parking lot of the Lucky Day Laundromat. We do not know whether he ordered him out of the vehicle, or told him to stay put. We do not know whether Perez attempted to comply, or whether he resisted arrest. But perhaps we know enough: On March 28, 2004, Portland police officer Jason Sery shot James Jahar Perez three times in the chest, killing him where he sat; and there was no weapon in Perez's car.

For most of a month the city held its breath. The police chief begged the public for patience, the mayor pled for calm. Black preachers held prayerful rallies and sermonized on the legacy of Martin Luther King. All the while, there was one idea on everybody's mind, though the newspapersworked their way around the subject and the media studiously avoided mention of the word — riot.

In George Park, a few yards from the site of the shooting, I asked a group of teenage boys what would happen if Sery wasn't prosecuted. They debated the possibilities:

"There about to be a riot, bro. There about to be a riot." "I don't think it'd be as big as a riot. . . . Yesterday I seen the little rally on the news [and it] seemed pretty peaceful. But I think, you know, probably, man, it could get out of hand, though. But they don't want that, they really don't." The boys, all black, were sitting on a jungle gym when I approached, some of them smoking cigarettes, hanging out in the park in the middle of the day--a schoolday. They were, on the whole, courteous, intelligent, and articulate. And they had virtually no faith in the legal system. When I asked if they expected Sery to be convicted, they were almost disdainful of the question. One of them told me: "He gonna get around it and get back on the job. Probably gonna take a while, but he gonna get back on the job. Nothin' gonna happen to him."

The sidewalk in front of the Lucky Day is full, near to overflowing. It is crowded with flowers, stuffed animals, candles and balloons, sympathy cards and hand-painted signs. Newspaper clippings are taped to the windows, and photos of Perez, smiling and holding his son. Messages written with marker on poster board say things like: "J-Rock, you will always be loved and missed" and "Injustice for one is injustice for all." The memorial continues to grow, shifting as the candles burn out and the flowers wither. Then fresh bouquets are added and other candles are lit. The coroner's report cites very high levels of cocaine in Perez's system, plus bags of "apparent drug material" found in his mouth and in his pockets. This is almost universally disbelieved in the black community.

When a Portland cop shot an epiletpic wrongly placed in a mental ward, the chief of police awarded him a medal for valor.

At the same time, many people told me of Officer Sery's bad reputation, though they were generally unclear on the specifics. The Oregonian and other local media have since found some evidence that throw the drug tests into question and confirm Sery's reputation as a hot head--but that is hardly the point. Much of the evidence was not publicly available at the time of my interviews, but people were willing to believe in Sery's bad reputation in a way they were not willing to believe in Perez's autopsy report. There is only one fact that matters: White cops killed an unarmed black person--again!

The shooting of James Jahar Perez came less than a year after a remarkably similar case. On May 5, 2003, Portland Police officer Scott McCollister shot and killed Kendra James, a 21-year-old black woman, as she attempted to leave a traffic stop. James was not armed. Anger over the James shooting burned hotter after it was discovered that the cops involved met for dinner before speaking with investigators. Police administrators struggled to make excuses, both for the shooting and for the botched investigation. Thousands of people--Portlanders of all races--marched in protest.

The Kendra James shooting and the resulting demonstrations helped cement a bond between prominent members of the black community and their Latino counterparts. They drew comparisons between the James incident and an earlier outrage--the April 2001 shooting of Jose Santos Victor Mejia Poot.

Jose Mejia, a Latino man, was boarding a public bus when he suffered an epileptic seizure and became unresponsive. The driver flagged down a passing squad car, and the cops removed Mejia from the bus, then beat him in front of witnesses. He was arrested, erroneously placed in a mental ward, and two days later escaped from his room and refused to return. When the police arrived, Mejia confronted them with an aluminum rod he had removed from a door. Officer Jeffrey Bell shot and killed Jose Mejia in the hospital corridor. Police Chief Mark Kroeker awarded Bell a medal,

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During the period January 2001 to April 2004, the Portland police shot 23 people and killed nine--11 of them were people of color in a city that is 77.9 percent white.

prompting calls for the chief's resignation.

All this history caught up to Chief Kroeker in August of 2003. Within the span of a few days, three separate developments dissolved whatever remained of the chief's credibility. First, consultants with the Police Assessment Resource Center blasted the bureau for its handling of shooting incidents, citing the failure of detectives to do things as basic as interviewing witnesses. Then, five of the nine members of the civilian review board resigned after their director refused to examine the Mejia case. And finally, Kroeker took this ill-chosen opportunity to announce the discipline for Scott McCollister, the cop who killed Kendra James. McCollister, Kroeker decided, would not be disciplined for the shooting itself, but he would be suspended for showing poor judgment in his handling of the incident. This decision satisfied no one. The police union wanted McCollister exonerated, and the public at large wanted him fired. The chief was left without support and the mayor demanded his resignation. He was replaced by Derrick Foxworth, a soft-spoken black man, a long-time Portland resident, and a veteran of the police bureau.

Public attitudes about Foxworth are distinctly ambivalent. Some view him as a good man trying to fix a bad system; others think he's "a puppet [used] to oppress his own people." Either way, Foxworth hasn't inspired the personal hatred that Kroeker did, but his leadership has done little to improve community relations overall. Martin Gonzalez, president of the Latino Network, sees no progress: "Nothing has changed, except that it has gotten worse. In the past year the Portland Police killed five people of color."

Even as a set, three deaths in three years would probably not explain the intensity of the anger. But during the period January 2001 to April 2004, the Portland police shot 23 people and killed nine. Eleven of those the police shot were people of color--this, in a city that the 2000 census registers as 77.9% white. The fact that both Kendra James and James Perez were killed during traffic stops may also be significant. According to the police bureau's own data (released in May 2001), black drivers are 2.6 times more likely to be pulled over than are white drivers. These numbers resonate with Perez's own record. Since 1994, he received 19 citations. In eight of these cases (42%) the only charges were driving without a license or with no insurance--violations that would not be evident prior to the stop. The cumulative effect of such discriminatory treatment is not to be underestimated.

On April 4, just a week after the killing, more than one thousand people attended a rally sponsored by the Coalition of Black Men. Speaker after speaker urged a commitment to nonviolence, and several gently chided a group of teenagers who carried signs reading, "Fuck the Police." State Senator Avel Gordly called for better police training, and also asked that the public give "full support to Police Chief Derrick Foxworth."

Everyone spoke of the need for change, but few offered anything for people to do besides registering to vote. From podiums and pulpits, the message has been one of caution, forbearance, and restraint. The clergy in particular have steadfastly warned against "hate" and "retaliation." After talking to people in the Saint Johns neighborhood, the speeches of the civil rights leaders seemed strangely abstract and even a little out of touch.

I asked Caine Lowery, a member of the NAACP chapter at Portland State University, what he thought about the pleas for calm. He told me: "I don't think it's necessary to chill people out. I think there needs to be a fiery response from the community to the police department, because every single day people are being harassed. . . and nobody seems to get fired up enough. That's why the police continue to do what they do. And when they get a strong response from the community, that's going to stop everything that goes on, I believe, hopefully."

On April 22, the grand jury announced its decision not to indict officer Jason Sery. On the whole, the public's response was anticlimactic. The two days following the announcement saw two demonstrations, each drawing about 250 people. The first, organized by the Albina Ministerial Alliance, featured repeated calls for peace and a sorrowful rendition of "We Shall Overcome." The second, led by the avowedly revolutionary organization Arissa, marched to the mayor's front step and advocated community self-defense.

Chief Foxworth has not announced whether Sery will lose his job, or whether he will be exonerated altogether, or whether (like McCollister) he will be suspended for a few months and then return to duty. Whatever discipline the chief sets will likely be challenged by the police union, even to the point of arbitration. CP

Kristian Williams is a member of Rose City Copwatch and the author of Our Enemies in Blue: Police and Power in America *(forthcoming, Soft Skull.)*

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to call on a general from Saddam Hussein's Republican Guard, contemptuously disbanded by Bremer in May last year, to take responsibility for security in Falluja? Why was that the only way to bring the three-week siege to an end? A CNN/USA Today poll in March showed that 56 per cent of Iraqis wanted an immediate withdrawal of coalition forces; and that was before the uprisings. The photographs of Iraqi prisoners being ill-treated by American guards in Abu Ghraib caused shock but not surprise inside the country, since stories have been circulating for months in Baghdad about systematic torture in the prisons.

Iraq is essentially controlled by the US military. The State Department was sidelined before the war. The uniformed military and the civilian CPA report separately to the Pentagon. The US army devises and carries out its policies regardless of Bremer. In a panicky reaction to the guerrilla attacks, the CPA recently announced it was closing the biggest highways around Baghdad to civilian traffic. The tone of its statement was threatening. 'If civilians drive on the closed section of the highways they may be engaged with deadly force,' the CPA warned. In other words, they would be shot. Within a few hours the US army announced that it knew nothing of the CPA's decision and had no intention of enforcing it. Bremer was forced to drop the idea.

This is something more than the traditional split between civilians and the military. Bremer, who has shown relentlessly poor judgment over the last year, keeps decision-making within a small closed circle. Senior members of the CPA say they know nothing beyond what they read in the newspapers. But important decisions, such as disbanding the Iraqi army, are taken in Washington by officials in the Pentagon such as Paul Wolfowitz. The prime aim of the White House is for news from Iraq to look good in the run-up to the presidential election. The unbridled greed of firms bidding for CPA contracts and the privatizing fervor of the neo-cons has led to damaging failures. For instance, the contract to set up a television station supporting the US was given to a company popular with the Pentagon, but with no experience of television. As a result

The US has very few friends in Iraq, but even those they have sense that this is the ebb-tide of the occupation.

Iraqis mostly get their news from al-Jazeera and the al-Arabiya satellite stations, both deeply hostile to the US occupation.

It was the US marines who besieged Falluja, turning the city into a nationalist symbol, but it was Bremer who initiated the confrontation with Muktada al-Sadr, failing to realise how disillusioned the 15 or 16 million Iraqi Shias, a majority of the population, are with the occupation. They think the US wants to deny them power by postponing elections and using the Kurds to retain effective control of the country.

The Army of the Mehdi, Sadr's militia, are not very appealing. I ran into a group of them when I was trying to get to Najaf, where Sadr had taken refuge. They were guarding a checkpoint just outside the town of Kufa. I was wearing a red and white keffiyeh and sitting inconspicuously in the back of the car because foreigners had been shot and killed in the area. The Mehdi Army did not like me wearing a keffiyeh. There were a lot of things about me they did not like. They were intensely suspicious of my satellite phone, mobile and camera. At first they tried to push me into another car and then they decided to take ours. Three gunmen crammed in. We followed another car also filled with gunmen to the green-domed Imam Ali mosque in the centre of Kufa, which they had made their headquarters.

Once we had parked outside the mosque the gunmen relaxed a little. One of them offered me a cigarette and I took it, though I had given up smoking. Most of them came from the slums of Sadr City in Baghdad. They spoke about defending Iraq from America and Israel and about the theft of Iraqi oil. Their slogans were nationalist rather than religious. Finally my mobile and my passport reappeared, though not my satellite phone, which I saw a black-clad gunman covertly pocket. It did not seem a good moment to demand it back.

The April uprisings may have been the turning point for the US in Iraq. It has relied on armed strength and has largely spurned local allies, but its military power is no longer translating into political influence. It did not dare storm Falluja and Najaf, though they were held by fewer than 2000 lightly armed gunmen. The US has very few friends in Iraq, but even those they have sense that this is the ebb-tide of the occupation. CP

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